



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

[FWS–R3–ES–2020–0124; FXES11140300000–201]

Draft Environmental Assessment and Proposed Habitat Conservation Plan; Receipt of an Application for an Incidental Take Permit, Meadow Lake Wind Resource Area, White and Benton Counties, Indiana

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Notice of availability; request for comment and information.

SUMMARY: We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have received an application from six wholly owned subsidiaries of EDP Renewables North America LLC collectively known as Meadow Lake Group (applicant) for an incidental take permit (ITP) under the Endangered Species Act, for its Meadow Lake Wind Resource Area wind project. If approved, the ITP would be for a 29-year period and would authorize the incidental take of the Indiana bat and the northern long-eared bat. The applicant has prepared a habitat conservation plan (HCP) that describes the actions and measures that the applicant would implement to avoid, minimize, and mitigate incidental take of the species. We also announce the availability of a draft environmental assessment (DEA), which has been prepared in response to the permit application in accordance with the requirements of the

National Environmental Policy Act. We request public comment on the application and associated documents.

DATES: We will accept comments received or postmarked on or before **[INSERT DATE 30 DAYS AFTER DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE *FEDERAL REGISTER*]**.

ADDRESSES: *Document availability:* Electronic copies of the documents this notice announces, as well as public comments we receive, will be available online in Docket No. FWS–R3–ES–2020–0124 at <http://www.regulations.gov>.

Comment submission: In your comment, please specify whether your comment addresses the proposed HCP, draft EA, or any combination of the aforementioned documents, or other supporting documents. You may submit written comments by one of the following methods:

- *Online:* <http://www.regulations.gov>. Search for and submit comments on Docket No. FWS–R3–ES–2020–0124.
- *By hard copy:* Submit comments by U.S. mail to Public Comments Processing, Attn: Docket No. FWS–R3–ES–2020–0124; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 5275 Leesburg Pike, MS: PRB/3W; Falls Church, VA 22041–3803.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Scott Pruitt, Field Supervisor, Bloomington Ecological Services Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 620 South Walker Street, Bloomington, IN 47403; telephone: 812–334–4261, extension 214; or Andrew Horton, Regional HCP Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service – Interior Region 3, 5600 American Blvd., West, Suite 990, Bloomington, MN 55437–1458; telephone: 612–713–5337.

Individuals who are hearing impaired or speech impaired may call the Federal Relay Service at 1–800–877–8339 for TTY assistance.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: We, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), have received an application from EDP Renewables’ Meadow Lake Group (applicant) for an incidental take permit (ITP) under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA; 16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), for its Meadow Lake Resource Area (project or MLWRA). The MLWRA consists of 414 turbines that are owned by six companies: Meadow Lake Wind Farm LLC, Meadow Lake Wind Farm II LLC, Meadow Lake Wind Farm III LLC, Meadow Lake Wind Farm IV LLC, Meadow Lake Wind Farm V LLC, and Meadow Lake Wind Farm VI LLC. If approved, the ITP would be for a 29-year period and would authorize the incidental take of an endangered species, the Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*), and a threatened species, the northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*). The applicant has prepared a habitat conservation plan (HCP) that describes the actions and measures that the applicant would implement to avoid, minimize, and mitigate incidental take of the Indiana bat and northern long-eared bat. We also announce the availability of a draft environmental assessment (DEA), which has been prepared in response to the permit application in accordance with the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA; 42 U.S.C. 4321 *et seq.*). We request public comment on the application and associated documents.

Background

Section 9 of the ESA and its implementing regulations prohibit the “take” of animal species listed as endangered or threatened. Take is defined under the ESA as to “harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect “listed animal species,” or to attempt to engage in such conduct” (16 U.S.C. 1538). However, under

section 10(a) of the ESA, we may issue permits to authorize incidental take of listed species. “Incidental take” is defined by the ESA as take that is incidental to, and not the purpose of, carrying out an otherwise lawful activity. Regulations governing incidental take permits for endangered and threatened species, respectively, are found in the Code of Federal Regulations at 50 CFR 17.22 and 50 CFR 17.32.

Applicant's Proposed Project

The applicant requests a 29-year ITP to take the federally endangered Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*) and threatened northern long-eared bat (*Myotis septentrionalis*). The applicant determined that unavoidable take is reasonably certain to occur incidental to operation of 414 previously constructed wind turbines. The proposed conservation strategy in the applicant's proposed HCP is designed to avoid, minimize, and mitigate the impacts of the covered activity on the covered species. The biological goals and objectives are to minimize potential take of Indiana bats and northern long-eared bats through on-site minimization measures and to provide habitat conservation measures for Indiana bats and northern long-eared bats to offset any impacts from operations of the project. The HCP provides on-site avoidance and minimization measures, which include turbine operational adjustments. The estimated level of take from the project is 728 Indiana bats and 169 northern long-eared bats over the 29-year project duration. To offset the impacts of the taking of Indiana bats and northern long-eared bats, the applicant proposes mitigation that will consist of one or more of the following: protection of a hibernaculum, protection of summer maternity colony habitat, restoration of summer maternity colony habitat, and protection of swarming habitat.

National Environmental Policy Act

The issuance of an ITP is a Federal action that triggers the need for compliance with NEPA. We prepared a draft EA that analyzes the environmental impacts on the human environment resulting from three alternatives: A no-action alternative, the proposed action, and a more restrictive alternative consisting of feathering at a rate of wind speed that results in less impacts to bats.

Next Steps

The Service will evaluate the permit application and the comments received to determine whether the application meets the requirements of section 10(a) of the ESA. We will also conduct an intra-Service consultation pursuant to section 7 of the ESA to evaluate the effects of the proposed take. After considering the above findings, we will determine whether the permit issuance criteria of section 10(a)(1)(B) of the ESA have been met. If met, the Service will issue the requested ITP to the applicant.

Request for Public Comments

The Service invites comments and suggestions from all interested parties during a 30-day public comment period (see **DATES**). In particular, information and comments regarding the following topics are requested:

1. The direct, indirect, or cumulative effects that implementation of any alternative could have on the human environment;
2. Whether or not the significance of the impact on various aspects of the human environment has been adequately analyzed; and
3. Any other information pertinent to evaluating the effects of the proposed action on the human environment.

Because this permit application was sufficiently complete prior to the effective date of the new NEPA regulations, we are exercising our discretion to conduct our NEPA analysis under the regulations in effect prior to September 14, 2020.

Availability of Public Comments

You may submit comments by one of the methods shown under **ADDRESSES**. We will post on <http://regulations.gov> all public comments and information received electronically or via hardcopy. All comments received, including names and addresses, will become part of the administrative record associated with this action. Before including your address, phone number, email address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment—including your personal identifying information—may be made publicly available at any time. While you can request in your comment that we withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public disclosure in their entirety.

Authority

We provide this notice under section 10(c) of the ESA (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*) and its implementing regulations (50 CFR 17.22) and the NEPA (42 U.S.C. 4371 *et seq.*) and its implementing regulations (40 CFR 1506.6 (2019); 43 CFR part 46).

Lori Nordstrom,
Assistant Regional Director,
Ecological Services.

